

**Abstract 684**

**TITLE:** Why Gender Ideologies Matter in HIV Prevention Interventions with Youth

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**ISSUE:** HIV prevention curricula traditionally teach information and safer sex skills but do not address the underlying reasons why young people engage in risky sexual behavior. In particular, HIV prevention interventions rarely target the gender ideologies that regulate adolescent sexual behavior.

**SETTING:** Classroom based HIV prevention education workshops with a highly racially and economically diverse population of middle school and high school youth in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**PROJECT:** The AIDS Prevention Program (APP) at the YWCA of the Mid-Peninsula has developed an innovative HIV prevention curriculum which not only includes information and skills-building activities, but also addresses the complex role that gender ideologies, sexual scripts, and internalized peer pressure play in sexual decision-making. By empowering youth with critical thinking skills about gender ideologies and sexual scripts, this curriculum helps youth become internally motivated to identify, evaluate, and resist the pressures that prevent them from choosing and enacting HIV prevention practices. A classroom activity, "The Game," which addresses gender ideologies in an interactive format using youths' own experiences will be demonstrated.

**RESULTS:** In the 1997-98 school year, 503 9<sup>th</sup> grade students participated in an APP intervention and evaluation. Baseline data showed a high level of unprotected sexual intercourse (84%) and a high level of sexual intercourse under the influence of alcohol (22% of girls, 25% of boys) among the sexually active students. Results confirmed the researchers' hypothesis that a correlation exists between beliefs in gender ideologies and risky sexual behavior. In particular, the data showed that boys hold strong stereotypical beliefs about masculinity and femininity, which are correlated with higher levels of unprotected sex. 96% of participants reported high approval of the intervention and outcome evaluation data indicated promising trends towards sexual intercourse postponement among sexually inactive girls.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** APP's findings validated the theory that gender ideologies are correlated with sexual risk taking behavior and suggest that interventions addressing gender-related messages about sex specifically be targeted at boys. Further, the positive evaluation of our intervention indicates that interactive activities such as "The Game" are a good way to target gender ideologies in a classroom setting and empower youth to resist gender-based pressures around sex.

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